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Honolulu Fourth Graders Receive Health Lessons from NIH Acting Deputy Director

BETHESDA, MD — Joyce Tsuda's fourth grade class at Honolulu, Hawaii's Kahili Waeha Elementary School received a shipment of brains this month — brain-shaped squeeze balls in observance of Brain Awareness Week, that is. The squeeze balls are part of a monthly health awareness package the class receives from Dr. Yvonne Maddox, Acting Deputy Director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

The tradition began following "The National Institutes of Health - Hawaii Research Partnership Site Visit" made in November 2001. During the visit, Dr. Maddox and other NIH experts addressed local researchers, university students and medical professionals during a series of technical assistance workshops sponsored by NIH. In addition, leaders from NIH participated in a series of public outreach events on the Big Island in Hilo as well as in Honolulu, Hawaii. The public events, organized with the help of Honolulu resident and NIH Director's Council of Public Representatives member Doug Yee, included a public lecture at the University of Hawaii campus, as well as visits by NIH officials to local hospitals, rotary clubs and other community groups. As part of these visits, Dr. Maddox was invited to speak to Tsuda's 4th grade class.

"I enjoyed my time with the fourth graders so much that I wanted to continue the relationship after I returned," said Dr. Maddox, who was driven to the school by State Senator David Matsuura. "Sending a surprise box each month with health information and materials is a wonderful way to promote health awareness at an early age and to get the children interested in science, health professions, and the work of the NIH."

Using the 2002 National Health Observances calendar as her guide, Dr. Maddox chooses several appropriate health topics to highlight each month. In addition to Brain Awareness Week, Dr. Maddox has included health information and materials related to nutrition, dental health, heart health, low vision, and other topics. Booklets, water bottles, heart-shaped squeeze balls, and dental kits with tooth paste and tooth brushes are just some of the items that have been included in the health awareness packages. These items

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are donated by the NIH Institutes that specialize in these health topics. Information about NIH, such as a map and organizational chart, has also been included.

The surprise packages have been extremely popular with the fourth graders, who have gained valuable information about positive health behaviors such as choosing appropriate snack foods and taking care of their teeth. The packages also have helped improve the students' reading skills. When the packages arrive, students are given the health education pamphlets and booklets as part of their nightly reading assignments.

Packages were sent in February and March, each accompanied by a personal letter from Dr. Maddox to the students. The fourth graders are eagerly awaiting the April package. "This is a real privilege," said Tsuda. "The kids are just so enthusiastic...When we got the March box, they couldn't wait to open it."

While the students have been enthusiastic about all the materials, the brain-shaped squeeze balls have been particularly popular. Said Tsuda jokingly, "I told the kids, 'Listen, you've got an extra brain now. If you don't use it, you lose it.'"

Dr. Maddox has also enjoyed the experience. "I explained to the kids that our job at the NIH is to improve the health of our nation and the world," she said. "These packages, in a small way, help us to bring this mission to the fourth graders of Kahili Waeha Elementary School."

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